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Series 103 -Review of Article - Aga Khan or Ayatullah - the choice for the Khojas in the 19th century

Date: 26-May-2026

Few months back, i.e., in January 2026, I got a chance to review the article “Aga Khan or Ayatullah - the choice for the Khojas in the nineteenth century”. I am thankful to Kumail Rajani, the author of the article, for sharing it with me. He also asked for my feedback and comments.

The complete article can be read here...

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186325101296 (It is hosted on Cambride.org)

The author Kumail Rajani is a senior lecturer at

> Imam Sajjad Chair in Shiʿi Studies
> Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies
> University of Exeter
> Stocker Road, Exeter, EX4 4ND

I am happy to post below the feedback and comments I shared with Kumail Rajani (with his consent)

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My Feedback and Comments shared over email

Email to k.r<xxxx>@<xxx>.ac.uk sent on: 12 January 2026 at 17:27

Dear Rajani Kumail-ji,

Thank you for seeking my feedback and comments on your article.

Your article, as you have mentioned, is primarily about the choice of religious sect (known by their heads) made by the Khojas.

As you have rightly mentioned, your article primarily deals with the historical choices made by the Khoja community regarding religious sects, particularly in relation to their respective spiritual heads. At the outset, I would like to clarify that I am not well versed about this specific field. However, since I come from an ex-Satpanth community, there is

one particular perspective that I believe has a strong and direct relevance to the subject you have addressed.

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Before elaborating on that perspective, a brief background about my community may be useful. My community practiced Satpanth for nearly 400 years, and even today a very small minority continues to do so. To the best of our knowledge, ours is perhaps the only community in India that has collectively reverted from Islam to Hinduism through sustained internal efforts. Although this process began nearly 220 years ago, it gathered significant momentum about a century ago.

We are fortunate to possess detailed historical records documenting this journey. The website of our community's central organisation is https://abkkpsamaj.org/. Most of the relevant historical books and archival material are available at https://abkkpsamaj.org/books/, and a chronological overview can be found at https://abkkpsamaj.org/historical-dates/. You may also find it useful to read *GharWaapsi*, authored by CA Chandrakant Patel. The book is originally in Gujarati, with an AI-assisted English translation available on the same website. For anyone interested in the subject of religious conversion, this work offers a rare perspective—that of the affected community itself.

In my view, a comprehensive understanding of your article's subject would benefit from examining two parallel viewpoints:

1. The perspective of Satpanth followers at the time (not from a contemporary lens), and
2. The perspectives of Aga Khan and the Twelvers (Isna Ashari / Ayatullah) when they entered the historical narrative.

To understand the mindset of early Satpanth followers, it is essential to examine how Hindus were originally drawn to Satpanth. This requires a close study of both Satpanth literature—particularly the *Dasavatar* narratives and the Ginans—and the socio-historical background of the Hindu communities that adopted Satpanth. The central question, though uncomfortable for many, is whether these conversions were entirely voluntary or facilitated through doctrinal ambiguity and misrepresentation with the aim to convert.

The point I am trying to make is that, we should first find out whether the Hindus willingly wanted to convert to Satpanth, or were they tricked (cunningly) to make them follow

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Satpanth under some false pretext. Unfortunately, the answer is not everyone would like to hear. Nor Hindus, nor Satpanthis, nor present muslims who have left Satpanth to become staunch followers of so-called 'pure' Islam.

Historical evidence suggests that Satpanth literature was consciously designed to persuade ordinary Hindus that Satpanth represented the true Sanatan Dharma of the Kaliyug. Texts portraying Murtaza Ali as the tenth avatar of Vishnu are well documented and widely acknowledged by researchers. This framework is often justified retrospectively by suggesting that it eased the transition of converts into Islam. While the transition may indeed have been made easier, it was achieved by obscuring the true destination of that journey. Early converts believed they were remaining within the fold of Sanatan Dharma, not departing from it. Newly attracted Hindus believed that their destination was the true Sanatan Dharm, but under this false pretext, the Satpanth drove them to the destination of Islam., all without the wish and will of the newly converted Satpanthis.

However, in order to legitimize this fraudulent / criminal act, it is whitewashed by saying that Satpanth was introduced to make the journey of converts to Islam easy. Yes, the journey was made easy, but by fooling them. The journey was not what they wanted to travel. The Hindus were brainwashed to such an extent that they always felt that they were on the right path of Sanatan (not Islam) religion. This is the viewpoint of the first initial Hindu converts to Satpanth. Unfortunately, the present generation of these Satpanth followers do not even know that their forefathers were cheated. They do not know that their forefathers never wanted to leave Sanatan (Hindu) religion. They do not know that their forefathers never wanted to ultimately convert to Islam.

As mentioned above, over time, this ideological structure ensured that subsequent generations remained unaware that their ancestors neither intended nor consented to a final conversion to Islam. The covert conversion methodology—widely attributed to Pir Sadruddin—operated through a gradual, three-stage process:

1. Creating doubt and an inferiority complex among Hindus,
2. Establishing a central religious authority during a period of doctrinal confusion, and
3. Severing cultural, societal and religious links that would allow a return to Hinduism.

After these three stages are crossed, the person would eventually convert to Islam.

It is obvious that the victims (fresh Satpanth converts) are unaware of this religious conversion design.

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By the time Aga Khan entered the Satpanth narrative, the community had reached the second stage of this process. The Aga Khan case of 1866 clearly illustrates that the dispute was fundamentally about religious authority—specifically, the identity of the living representative of the tenth avatar of Vishnu. At that time, Khojas openly identified themselves as Satpanthis, and their religious worldview remained a synthesis of Hindu and Islamic elements. The Aga Khan case 1866 amply clearifies this. The whole fight was about who is the religious head of Satpanth, the present form of 10th Avatar of Vishnu. Remember, during those days, the Khojas were openly associating themselves with Satpanth, unlike Ismailism in present times. In those times, the followers of Satpanth, were in a complete state of religious confusion. Their religious texts were a mix of Hindu and Islamic elements. They believed that the 10th avatar of Hindu god Vishnu is Ali and followed by his descendants. Identifying themselves as normal Hindus brought them an inferiority complex. Because the 'true' Hindus of Kaliyug era were Satpanthis. Hence, it was a pride for them to call themselves as Satpanthis. The religious texts compelled with the society they were living in fuelled the confusion. This was the textbook perfect ideological subversion of Hindus.

What followed, in my assessment, is often inadequately addressed in existing scholarship. Nearly four centuries had passed since the initial conversions. The Satpanth followers of 1866 were deeply invested in the belief that allegiance to the tenth avatar of Vishnu defined their religious identity, even though they were unaware of how this belief had been shaped historically. When the question arose as to whether Aga Khan or the Ayatullah represented legitimate authority, the community divided accordingly.

What happened next, is something most of the researchers fail to either understand, or do not have courage to openly write about it. They may have their own reasons. Nearly four centuries had passed since the initial conversions. The Satpanth followers of 1866 were deeply invested in the belief that allegiance to the tenth avatar of Vishnu defined their religious identity, even though they were unaware of how this belief had been shaped historically. Primarily the Hindu Lohanas, and some other Hindu communities, were practising as Satpanthis. It is very obvious that none of the followers of Satpanth (during the year 1866) would have known that their forefathers had initially chosen Satpanth, falsely believing it to be the true Sanatan religion of Kaliyug (as I already covered above).

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The efforts of Pir Sadruddin were yielding fruits. The fruits in the terms of the totally confused state of the converts. The converts who had forgotten their roots, who had no pride for their roots, and who did not want to be associated with their roots. However, they were clear about one thing. Their allegiance to the 10th avatar of Hindu God Vishnu. Remember here that they were fooled/tricked to believe that the 10th avatar will be a muslim. Needless to say this was achieved because the Satpanthis had undergone a very high level of sophisticated nature of brainwashing. The GharWaapsi book, as mentioned above, covers this point perfectly and in a very easy manner to understand.

At this time, came the crisis of who is the religious head of Satpanth community. Aga Khan or Ayatullah. The Aga Khan was successful in his claim that he is the 10th avatar (Nishkalanki Narayan avatar or Kalki Avatar - as per Satpanth Dashavatar) and hence he is the religious head of Satpanth community. It is for this reason that the dasond (tithe) money collected from the community should be given to him.

From a Hindu perspective, this division may be understood as a fragmentation of a community that was itself the product of prolonged ideological manipulation. The Satpanth followers were, and remain, the primary victims of this process—often unaware of their own historical trajectory. They clearly wanted to follow the 10th avatar of Hindu God Vishnu (as claimed in the Dashavatar), but did not know who that real person was.

As said earlier, those who believed (after the Aga Khan case of 1866) believed that Aga Khan was their 10 avatar of Vishnu, followed him. And those who had faith in Ayatullah called themselves as Isna Ashari Khojas or Twelvers. To my mind, from the viewpoint of Hindus, this was nothing but division of the 'fruits' of the efforts of Pir Sadruddin. First converts to Satpanth are the real victims, as they had never envisaged that their future generations would be drawn towards Islam, due to their present acts. Even today's Satpanthis do not know about this victimhood. The sad part is that these very victims consider their tyrant/oppressor as their hero. For any normal person this incomprehensible, sophisticated nature of brainwashing can even exist is beyond their wildest imagination.

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Finally, I wish to clearly state that my observations are not directed against any individual, group, or religion. My intent is neither to offend nor to disparage, but to engage with the subject from an academic and historical standpoint.

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ARTICLE

Aga Khan or Ayatullah: the choice for the Khojas in the nineteenth century

Kumail Rajani

Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK
Email: k.rajani@exeter.ac.uk

Abstract

The Khojas are a caste-based community that emerged in the fourteenth century across Sindh, Kutch, and Kathiawar.* For centuries, they maintained a distinct identity that blended Hindu and Islamic traditions, which resisted rigid classification within either religious framework. The nineteenth century, however, brought profound change through two major schisms that reshaped their religious and social identity. The first, rooted in disputes over the authority of the Aga Khan, culminated in the 1866 Aga Khan Case and prompted some to align with Sunni Islam. The second, a theological rupture, led to the rise of Isna Ashari Khojas. This shift was influenced by Twelver Shiʿi mujtahids in Najaf and Karbala, who, through Indian Shiʿi *ʿulamāʾ* and *mullā*s, reshaped Khoja religious identity. This article explores the central role of Twelver Shiʿi networks and their transregional reach in shaping this transformation. It focuses on how changes in legal identity, religious authority, and migratory patterns across Bombay, Zanzibar, and the shrine cities of Iraq contributed to the emergence of a distinct Isna Ashari Khoja identity. In doing so, it situates Khoja transformations within a wider historical context of religious affiliation and social organisation across South Asia and East Africa.

Keywords: Aga Khan; Ayatullah; Ismailis; Isna Asharis; Khojas

Introduction: rethinking the Khoja past

Khojas are believed to have originated in the fourteenth century when Muslim *pīr*s introduced Islamic teachings to communities in Sindh, Kutch, and Kathiawar, adapting these teachings to existing Hindu devotional and social contexts. This syncretic approach gave rise to what became known as the *Satpanth* tradition along with a corpus of devotional texts known as *Ginān*s.[1] At the outset, it is important to clarify that the Khojas were not a single,

* A note on transliteration: In this article, I have not adhered to a strict transliteration system for Gujarati, Kutchi, and Sindhi sources and names. Instead, I have opted for a simplified phonetic rendering to enhance readability and avoid obscuring names, especially given the lack of a consistent pattern and the variability in how these names appear across sources, having originally been rendered into Gujarati from Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. For Arabic, Persian, and Urdu terms, however, I have followed the *IE*3 transliteration system.

[1] For studies on the emergence and crystallisation of *Satpanth* and other syncretic traditions, see A. Nanji, *The Nizārī Ismāʿīlī Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent* (New York, 1978); D. S. Khan, *Crossing the Threshold: Understanding Religious Identities in South Asia* (London, 2004), pp. 28–29, 46–50; A. Asani, 'From Satpanthi to Ismaili Muslim: the articulation of Ismaili Khoja identity in South Asia', in *A Modern History of the Ismailis*, (ed.) F. Daftary (London, 2011), pp. 95–128. For studies on *Ginān*s, see C. Shackle and Z. Moir, *Ismaili Hymns from South Asia: An Introduction to the Ginans* (London, 1992); A. Asani, *Ecstasy and Enlightenment* (London, 2002); K. Gillani, 'The Ismaili

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homogeneous community; rather, they comprised a diverse array of castes that adopted this tradition and were given the title 'Khoja' by these very *pīr*s.[2] Similarly, the *Satpanth* tradition was not a singular or uniform doctrine but rather a layered synthesis of teachings developed over centuries by multiple *pīr*s and embraced by sundry communities, including, inter alia, the Khojas.[3] Likewise, *Ginān*s were not a single static text but an evolving body of devotional literature that developed over time.

By the seventeenth century, the Khojas had emerged as a distinct caste with a well-defined institutional structure. A key feature of their communal organisation was the *jamātkhānā* (house of the community), which was neither a mosque nor a temple, both in structure and function. It served as a communal space where the *jamāt* (community) gathered not only for worship but also to discuss community affairs. The *jamātkhānā* was administered by designated officials, including a head or chief, a secretariat, and an accountant. The Khojas were not unique in establishing *jamātkhānā*s—similar structures existed among other communities such as the Bohras and Memons.[4] However, the role, function, and governance of the Khoja *jamātkhānā* were as much organisational and institutional as they were religious. Jim Masselos has provided significant insights into the Khoja *jamātkhānā* in Bombay and its role in maintaining communal identity and cohesion.[5]

This is wrong statement. If you read the Satpanth Dashavatar, Ginans and other religious literature, you will know why.

While the precise origins of the *pīr*s who laid the foundations of the *Satpanth* tradition remain obscure, their role in shaping and consolidating Khoja religious identity was undeniably significant. Although the exact nature of this identity remains elusive, it is evident that the Khojas were neither strictly Hindu—if Hinduism is defined by exclusive devotion to a deity or set of deities—nor did they initially exhibit characteristics explicitly associated with either Sunni Islam (such as following the predominant Ḥanafī *fiqh* in the Indian subcontinent), Ismaili Shiʿism (such as explicit allegiance to the Nizārī imamate), or Twelver Shiʿism (such as committing to the doctrine of the Twelve Imams).[6] Besides the uncertainty surrounding the origins of these *pīr*s, their potential interconnections and affiliations with the Ismaili imams also remain unclear.[7] There is no definitive evidence confirming that they

"Ginan" tradition from the Indian subcontinent', *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 38 (2004), pp. 175–185; F. Mallison and Tazim R. Kassam (eds.), *Ginans: Texts and Contexts, Essays on Ismaili Hymns from South Asia* (New Delhi, 2010).

[2] Boivin uses the term 'Khojaisation' to illustrate the integrative process through which Hindu castes of varying occupational and social backgrounds were incorporated into the Khoja community through what could have been based on the 'sharing of a soteriological culture marked to varying degrees by Ismailism'. See M. Boivin, *Devotion, Religious Authority, and Social Structures in Sindh: Khojas, Vanyos, and Faqirs* (Leiden, 2024), pp. 24–74.

[3] For studies on non-Khoja *Satpanthi*s, see Z. Moir and Dominique-Sila Khan, 'New light on the Satpanthi Imamshahis of Pirana', *Journal of South Asian Studies* 33 (2010), pp. 210–234; S. Virani, '*Taqiyya* and identity in a South Asian community', *Journal of Asian Studies* 70 (2011), pp. 99–139.

[4] For Bohra *jamātkhānā*, see O. Akkerman, *A Neo-Fatimid Treasury of Books: Arabic Manuscripts among the Alawi Bohras of South Asia* (Edinburgh, 2022), p. 4; for Memon *jamātkhānā*, see P. Chopra, 'Refiguring the colonial city: recovering the role of local inhabitants in the construction of colonial Bombay, 1854–1918', *Buildings and Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* 14 (2007), p. 112. For an in-depth analysis of the role and function of Bohra, Khoja, and Memon *jamāt*s, see M. O'Sullivan, *No Birds of Passage: A History of Gujarati Muslim Business Communities, 1800–1975* (Cambridge, MA, 2023), pp. 16–30, 35–72.

[5] J. Masselos, 'The Khojas of Bombay', in *Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims in India*, (ed.) I. Ahmad (Delhi, 1978), pp. 101–102.

[6] Introducing the Khojas, Habib Ibrahim, a prominent Khoja merchant, stated in his testimony, 'Some say we are Soonees, some, Sheas. Our religion is a separate religion.' Reported in *Bombay Telegraph and Courier*, 24 June 1947, as cited in Masselos, 'Khojas of Bombay', pp. 103–104.

[7] W. Ivanow, 'The sect of Imam Shah in Gujrat', *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 12 (1936), pp. 41–42; W. Ivanow, *Ismaili Literature: A Bibliographical Survey* (Tehran, 1963), p. 174; D. S. Khan, 'The coming of Nikalank Avatar: a Messianic theme in some sectarian traditions of north-western India', *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 25 (1997), pp. 404–407; M. Boivin, 'The Ismaʿili–Isna ʿAshari divide among the Khojas: exploring forgotten judicial data from Karachi', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 24 (2014), pp. 382, 385. For an alternative opinion,

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were direct emissaries of the imams, as is often claimed, who resided in Persia. While community historical records indicate that Khojas travelled to Persia in the eighteenth century, it remains unclear whether these journeys were undertaken explicitly as acts of allegiance to the Nizārī imamate or as visits to revered *pīr*s.[8] These ambiguities emerged as central points of contention among the Khojas as they increasingly encountered and engaged with other religious traditions during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The nineteenth century was a period of considerable upheaval and contestation in defining the religious identity of the Khojas. During this time, the Khojas of Bombay became divided into three distinct factions: Sunni Khojas, Aga Khani Khojas, and Isna Ashari Khojas.[9] However, the prevailing historical narrative often presents this transformation as a linear process of religious conversion—a perspective that this study seeks to challenge. Competing claims regarding the Khojas' historical religious orientation further complicate the discourse. The Aga Khanis maintained that the Khojas were originally Ismaili Shiʿas, whereas the Isna Asharis contended that the Khojas had been Twelver Shiʿas from the outset.[10] This article critically examines the limitations of the conversion paradigm and proposes an alternative framework for understanding the evolution of Khoja religious identity.

Three key developments contributed to these claims and disputes. First, migration to Bombay in the early eighteenth century exposed Khojas to religious traditions that adhered to more rigid, non-syncretic frameworks, challenging their historically fluid religious identity. Second, the arrival of Aga Khan I in British India in 1843 introduced new leadership structures that redefined intra-community authority.[11] Third, legal disputes over family inheritance necessitated the formal classification of Khojas as either Hindu or Muslim under colonial legal frameworks that disrupted their historical fluidity.[12] Parallel to these developments, disputes emerged over the governance and ownership of communal assets, ultimately leading to two major schisms that reshaped the community's religious and social structure.

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see Nanji, *Nizārī Ismāʿīlī Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent*, pp. 22–27; S. Virani, *The Ismailis in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 39–43.

[8] T. Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case: Religion and Identity in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 22. For an alternative opinion, see Nanji, *Nizārī Ismāʿīlī Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent*, p. 29; Asani, 'From Satpanthi to Ismaili Muslim', p. 101.

[9] I use the term 'Aga Khani Khojas' rather than 'Ismaili Khojas', as it better reflects the contentions surrounding Khoja identity during the period under discussion. For the distinction between the terms 'Ismaili' and 'Aga Khani' in the period under discussion, see Boivin, *Devotion, Religious Authority, and Social Structures in Sindh*, pp. 48–49. Also, I adopt 'Isna Ashari' instead of 'Twelvers', reflecting the self-identification of Twelver Khojas in their religious institutions and communal discourse. However, I will use 'Twelver' when referring to the sect and 'Isna Ashari' as an adjective for Khojas. Furthermore, I use the Gujarati and Kutchi pronunciation 'Isna Ashari' rather than the Arabic and Persian 'Ithnā ʿAsharī' to remain consistent with the terminology used by the community in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

[10] For the claims regarding Ismaili affiliation, see Z. Moir, 'Historical and religious debates amongst the Indian Ismailis, 1840–1920', in *The Banyan Tree: Essays on Early Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages*, (ed.) M. Offredi (New Delhi, 2000), vol. i, pp. 131–153. For the claims of Isna Ashari affiliation, see E. D. Kaba, *Khoja Panth Darpan*–pt. vi (Amreli, 1915). Kaba argues that the *Ginān*s closely align with Isna Ashari beliefs, suggesting that their authors adhered to Isna Ashari Shiʿism and that those who recite them devotionally should be understood as following the same interpretation. He presented these arguments across eight booklets in response to Mastar Hasham Bogha's *Ismaili Darpan* (Mumbai, 1906).

[11] H. Algar, 'The revolt of Agha Khan Mahallati and the transference of the Ismaʿili imamate to India', *Studia Islamica* 29 (1969), pp. 55–81. Also see Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Ḥusaynī (Ḥasan ʿAlī Shāh), *The First Aga Khan: Memoirs of the 46th Ismaili Imam: A Persian edition and English translation of the ʿIbrat-afzā*, (eds.) and (trans.) D. Beben and Daryoush Mohammad Poor (London, 2021), pp. 116–130.

[12] For the colonial interpretation of legal rulings concerning syncretic traditions, see Sir T. E. Perry, *Cases Illustrative of Oriental Life and That Application of English Law to India Decided in Her Majesty's Supreme Court at Bombay* (London, 1853), pp. 110–129.

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This is Tithe (Dasond), i.e., 10% of one's income, which is compulsory in Satpanth religion. It is to be paid to thier God, i,e., Nishkalanki Narayan i.e., Imam of the time, i.e., present avatar of Mutaza Maula Ali

The first major schism within the Khojas emerged in the early nineteenth century, marking a pivotal moment in their socio-religious evolution. This division was not merely a doctrinal rupture but was rooted in broader debates on leadership, communal governance, and the reconfiguration of Khoja self-identification. The movement for reform was led by certain *shethias* (elite merchants), who became known as the *Barbhai* (twelve brethren). They sought to challenge existing power structures when the Aga Khan, still in Iran, demanded regular financial contributions—payments that some Khojas appear to have previously made on an ad hoc basis, regarding him as a revered *pīr*. His demands provoked resistance from the *Barbhai*, who saw the growing institutionalisation of his authority as a threat to communal autonomy, prompting efforts to redefine Khoja religious identity. Though often labelled as dissidents, these reformers were not a homogeneous bloc but a coalition with diverse ideological orientations, ranging from theological opposition to pragmatic efforts to preserve the community's self-governance.[13] Their opposition materialised most forcefully through legal challenges, particularly in cases concerning inheritance and communal governance.[14] The landmark 1866 Aga Khan Case provided the definitive legal resolution to these disputes, formally declaring the Khojas as 'Shiʿa Imami Ismailis' and consolidating the Aga Khan's leadership under British colonial jurisprudence.[15] In response, the *Barbhai* and their associates distanced themselves from this newly codified religious framework and aligned with the broader Sunni tradition, cementing a rupture that had been decades in the making.

The second major schism within the Khojas, which forms the central focus of this study, occurred in the latter half of the nineteenth century in the aftermath of the Aga Khan Case. Unlike the first division, this rupture was predominantly religious, leading to the emergence of Isna Ashari Khojas. While *shethias* played a role, the movement was largely driven by Twelver preachers (*mullās*) and religious scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*) from Karbala, Najaf, and parts of northern and southern India, who steered and guided the Khojas through a shifting religious landscape. This schism not only redefined religious allegiances but also reshaped communal affiliations. Though Isna Ashari Khojas departed from the then mainstream Khojas, they retained the Khoja name, distinguishing themselves from Aga Khani Khojas, who integrated into the broader Nizārī Ismaili community and self-identified as South Asian Nizārī Ismailis, and from Sunni Khojas, who gradually dissolved into the wider Sunni Muslim community, eventually identifying simply as Sunnis without maintaining a distinct Khoja identity. Their continued emphasis on communal heritage is reflected in the self-identification of 'Khoja Shiʿa Isna Asharis', signifying both their Khoja origins and adherence to Twelver Shiʿism.[16]

[13] Masselos, 'Khojas of Bombay', pp. 103–107; Asani, 'From Satpanthi to Ismaili Muslim', pp. 105–106; Purohit, *Aga Khan Case*, pp. 33–34.

[14] For these legal cases, see Perry, *Cases Illustrative of Oriental Life*; W. E. Hart, *Bombay High Court Reports: Reports of Cases Decided in the High Court of Bombay 1875* (Bombay, 1879), vol. xii, pp. 323–363; C. Hickling, 'Disinheriting Daughters: Applying Hindu Laws of Inheritance to the Khoja Muslim Community in Western India, 1847–1937' (unpublished MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1998); A. Shodhan, 'Legal formulation of the question of community: defining the Khoja collective', *Indian Social Science Review* 1 (1999), pp. 137–151; A. Shodhan, *A Question of Community: Religious Groups and Colonial Law* (Calcutta, 2001).

[15] Justice Arnould in his verdict of the Aga Khan Case defined Khoja as 'a sect of people whose ancestors were Hindus in origin, which was converted to and has throughout abided in the faith of the Shia Imami Ismailis, and which has always been and still is bound by ties of spiritual allegiance to the hereditary Imams of the Ismailis'. See Masselos, 'Khojas of Bombay', p. 112. For the detailed speech of the special counsel for the Aga Khan, see E. I. Howard, *The Shia School of Islam and Its Branches, Especially That of the Imamee-Ismailies: A Speech Delivered in the Bombay High Court in June, 1866* (Bombay, 1866).

[16] For the idea of a global Ismaili community, see J. Steinberg, *Ismaʿili Modern: Globalization and Identity in a Muslim Community* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011), pp. 87–106; F. Devji, 'The idea of Ismailism', in *Critical Muslim 10: Sects*, (eds.) Z. Sardar and R. Yassin-Kassab (London, 2014), pp. 51–62.

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This study argues that the history of the Khojas is far more intricate than commonly assumed. Religious transformations unfold over extended periods, shaped by multiple actors with diverse motivations. There was never a singular, monolithic understanding of Khoja identity; rather, it evolved in response to a range of socio-political, economic, and theological influences. While Masselos has discussed the Khojas of Bombay in the first half of the nineteenth century, his study does not extend to the latter half or the emergence of Isna Ashari Khojas. Michel Boivin, by contrast, has examined the division between Aga Khani and Isna Ashari Khojas but with a primary focus on Karachi. The present study addresses these gaps by analysing critical developments in Bombay during the second half of the nineteenth century, not only in terms of internal socio-religious dynamics but also through the influence of external actors, including *ʿulamāʾ* and clerical networks of Iraq, Iran, and the Indian Twelver scholarly community.

You should read GharWaapsi book by CA Chandrakant Patel - a history of ex-satpanthi community.

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Sources and methodology

Scholars studying the history of mercantile communities, such as the Khojas, have often lamented the scarcity of sources, with most studies relying heavily on colonial records.[17] However, an equally significant challenge lies in their limited engagement with vernacular sources, which, though available, remain largely under-utilised. Produced within these communities, vernacular sources are frequently dismissed on various grounds—whether for their perceived lack of intellectual rigour, their internal biases and polemical nature, or their failure to align with modern historiographical standards. While these concerns hold validity to varying degrees, the greater risk is the wholesale neglect of the perspectives from which these texts were written.

Rather than discarding these sources, their study demands the adoption of alternative methodologies that account for their epistemological and historiographical frameworks. Engaging with them through a critical yet historically sympathetic lens enables scholars to reconstruct past narratives in a more nuanced manner. This approach does not entail an uncritical acceptance of their claims but rather requires an acknowledgement of the socio-political contexts that shaped their production. Without such an effort, the histories of these communities risk being told exclusively through external frameworks, further marginalising their voices and historical agency.

It should be noted, however, that the issue is not always one of dismissal; in many cases, mercantile communities, such as the Khojas, simply did not produce their own historical records.[18] This challenge of a lack of documented history is further exacerbated when studying minorities within the Khojas, such as the Isna Ashari Khojas, for whom historical sources are particularly scarce. While the Aga Khani Khojas have received some scholarly attention, the history of the Isna Ashari Khojas remains largely under-explored.[19] The turbulent period of the Aga Khani–Isna Ashari divide, marked by internal conflicts,

[17] For instance, see Purohit, *Aga Khan Case*; A. Asani, 'The Khojahs of South Asia: defining a space of their own', *Cultural Dynamics* 13 (2001), pp. 155–168; Shodhan, 'Legal formulation of the question of community'. These works, like the vast majority of those on this topic, do not engage with the sources from within the tradition.

[18] It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that the Khojas began producing written accounts of their community's history. Then, within a span of 20 years, three books were written, namely S. Nanjiani, *Khoja Vrutant* (Ahmedabad, 1892); J. Rahimtoola, *Khoja Kawm-no Itihas* (Mumbai, 1905); E. D. Kaba, *Khoja Kawm-ni Tavarikh* (Amreli, 1912).

[19] Although studies on Aga Khani Khojas fall under the broader category of Khoja studies, the term 'Khoja' seldom appears in their titles. Such works are more commonly published under labels such as 'Ismaili' or '*Satpanthi*', with only a few exceptions explicitly referencing 'Khoja'. For instance, see J. Anderson, 'The Ismaʿili Khojas of East Africa: a new constitution and personal law for the community', *Middle Eastern Studies* 1 (1964), pp. 21–39; Asani, 'Khojahs of South Asia'; Asani, 'From Satpanthi to Ismaili Muslim'; M. Boivin, *L'Agha Khan et les Khojah: Islam chiite et dynamiques sociales dans le sous-continent indien (1843–1954)* (Paris, 2013); I. Surani, 'Satpanthī Khoja-s to Shīʿa Imāmī

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excommunications, assassinations, and sectarian violence, may have contributed to a culture of discretion, where documenting such histories was seen as politically and socially precarious.[20] This absence of formal historiography necessitates reliance on limited but critical sources, such as *Hidayat Prakash* of Mullā Qādar Ḥusayn b. Naḥīf (*circa* 1844–*circa* 1902, henceforth Mulla Qadar), one of the few surviving texts that provides insights into the Aga Khani–Isna Ashari divide, which this article examines.

The full title of the book is *Hidayat Prakash yane Mulla Qadar Husayn Saheb Karbalai nu Jivan Charitra* (*The Light of Guidance: The Biography of Mulla Qadar Husayn Saheb Karbalai*). Originally composed in Urdu under the title *Ziyā-e Hidāyat* (*The Light of Guidance*), the work was later translated into Gujarati as *Hidayat Prakash* by Edalji Dhanji Kaba (d. *circa* 1925). Due to concerns over potential repercussions, Kaba refrained from publishing the translation under his own name and instead entrusted the manuscript to Fazal Janmahmad who secured exclusive rights to the translation.[21] The text was ultimately published on 15 December 1909 in Zanzibar under Janmahmad's publishing house.[22] An English translation was released in 1972 in Karachi by Peermahomed Ebrahim Trust.[23]

Hidayat Prakash is an autobiographical account of Mulla Qadar which documents his preaching activities and engagements among the Khojas in Bombay between 1862 and 1899. The text appears to have been intended for a general audience rather than as a rigorous historical account, as it incorporates elements of hagiography and sectarian polemics. Mulla Qadar's narrative presents both valuable contributions and significant limitations. It remains the only detailed historical source on Isna Ashari Khojas from this period, making it a crucial point of reference for examining the religious, social, and communal challenges they encountered. The text provides insights not only into the Isna Asharis but also into Khojas more broadly, offering a window into their religious practices, internal divisions, and social struggles. In addition, it offers a rich account of the broader Shiʿi milieu in Bombay, including the formative role of the Moghal Masjid (founded between 1858 and 1860), and traces the transregional religious networks linking the Khojas to Shiʿi centres of learning in Najaf and Karbala. It also underscores the fluid nature of Isna Ashari identity during this transitional period, suggesting that boundaries between Aga Khani and Isna Ashari affiliations were not yet rigidly defined. As a rare first-hand account, *Hidayat Prakash* serves as a valuable source for reconstructing the evolving religious and social dynamics of the Khojas in the late nineteenth century.

Ismāʿīlī Ṭarīqa: the construction of religious identity of the Khoja-s Imāmī Ismāʿīlī of South Asia', *Studia Islamica* 112 (2017), pp. 1–28. For a community-based account of Aga Khani Khojas, see Z. K. Dhalla, *The History of Khoja Ismailis of East Africa* (independently published, 2023). For studies on Isna Ashari Khojas, see Boivin, 'Ismaʿili–Isna ʿAshari divide among the Khojas'; S. S. A. Rizvi and N. Q. King, 'Some East African Ithna-Asheri jamaats (1840–1967)', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 5 (1973), pp. 12–22. For community-based accounts of Isna Ashari Khojas, see H. A. Jaffer, *The Endangered Species: An Account of the Journey of Faith by the Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri Community* (Toronto, 2012); S. Panjwani, *The Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheris of East Africa: Their Quest for a New Socio-Religious Identity, 1860–1960* (Dar es Salaam, 2022).

[20] Anonymous, *A Voice from India* (London, 1864), p. 10; Masselos, 'Khojas of Bombay', p. 110; Asani, 'Khojahs of South Asia', p. 160.

[21] Edalji Dhanji Kaba had his own publishing house in Amreli, and during his sojourn in Bhavnagar, there was an attempt to assassinate him. E. D. Kaba, *Kaba ni Kahani* (Amreli, 1918), pp. 485–486, 494. It should be noted that the trustees of Peermahomed Ebrahim Trust erroneously attribute the translation to Fazal Janmahmad. See unknown, *Memoirs of Mulla Qadir Husain Sahib* (Karachi, 1972), p. 1.

[22] The original Urdu version and the first edition of the translation appear to no longer be extant. The second edition of the translation was published in 1380 AH/1960 by Asgarbhai Wadiya, the chief editor of *Apni Duniya* in Bombay, followed by a third edition published in 1411 AH/1991 by Gulam Abbas Amiri, the chief editor of *Rahe Najat* magazine, and distributed by Zulfiqar Book Depot. For this article, I am using the second edition due to its superior quality, both in terms of typesetting and the inclusion of comprehensive appendices.

[23] The translator has made an unhelpful intervention by adding headlines on nearly every page, often accompanied by two or three subheadings.

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Nevertheless, *Hidayat Prakash* is marked by notable limitations. A substantial portion of the text is devoted to Mulla Qadar's personal grievances regarding his treatment by the Isna Ashari Khojas, which detracts from a broader historical analysis. As someone who was not himself a Khoja, his understanding of intra-community dynamics may have been limited, a factor that likely shaped his narrative choices. Moreover, the text overlooks the contributions of other prominent Twelver *ʿulamāʾ* in Bombay, such as Shaykh Abū al-Qāsim Najafī (d. 1931), who arrived from Najaf around 1889–1890 and was instrumental in shaping the religious discourse of the period. The absence of the original Urdu manuscript further complicates scholarly assessment, as it leaves open the possibility of editorial modifications in later translation. These issues must be taken into account when evaluating the historical reliability and interpretive scope of *Hidayat Prakash*.

The study of the Isna Ashari Khojas and their intricate networks spanning Bombay, Zanzibar, Najaf, and Karbala present a significant yet often overlooked dimension of their evolving religious identity. While existing literature has examined governance, institutional structures, and reformist movements, the vital contributions of Twelver *ʿulamāʾ* of Karbala and Najaf, *shethia*s, and *mullā*s to their emergence and development remain insufficiently explored. Masselos's study on the Khojas of Bombay offers valuable insights into governance and institutional structures but only briefly touches upon the Isna Ashari Khojas.[24] Boivin's study on the divide between Aga Khani and Isna Ashari Khojas is a valuable contribution, in which he argues that religious identity functioned as a façade for their deeper social and economic power struggles.[25] While Boivin's argument appears well-grounded in the context of the Khojas of Karachi, its applicability to the Khojas of Bombay warrants further consideration. If religious identity were merely a façade, one might question why the Isna Ashari Khojas in Bombay did not align with the Sunni Khojas much earlier, despite experiencing similar socio-economic tensions. This article addresses this gap by examining the specific socio-religious environment of Bombay in the second half of the nineteenth century. It argues that, unlike Karachi, where the Isna Ashari presence emerged from within the Aga Khani fold alone, Bombay saw the development of an Isna Ashari identity within both Sunni and Aga Khani affiliations. In this context, religious differentiation—rather than socio-economic conflict—was primary, and it was driven by the intervention of Twelver *ʿulamāʾ* and local *mullā*s. By foregrounding these dynamics, the article offers a different framework for understanding the divergent trajectories of Khoja communities in Bombay and Karachi.

Similarly, Shireen Mirza's work on the Twelver Khoja diaspora and print culture provides an important perspective on modernist engagements but does not fully integrate the historical links between Bombay, East Africa, and the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala.[26] Likewise, studies by S. S. A. Rizvi and Noel King, Hatim Amiji, and Zulfikar Hirji acknowledge the presence of Isna Ashari Khojas in Zanzibar but do not weave them into the larger historical and geographical context connecting them with Bombay and the shrine cities of Iraq.[27] Even Nile Green's *Bombay Islam*, a foundational work on the city's religious landscape, overlooks the Isna Ashari Khojas and their contributions. The most nuanced treatment of

[24] Masselos, 'Khojas of Bombay', p. 115.

[25] Boivin, 'Ismaʿili–Isna ʿAshari divide among the Khojas', p. 382. For a detailed account of the religious affiliation and social organisation of Khojas in general, see Boivin, *Devotion, Religious Authority, and Social Structures in Sindh*, pp. 24–74.

[26] S. Mirza, 'Travelling leaders and connecting print cultures: two conceptions of Twelver Shiʿi reform in the Indian Ocean', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 24 (2014), pp. 455–475.

[27] Rizvi and King, 'Some East African Ithna-Asheri jamaats'; H. Amiji, 'Some notes on religious dissent in nineteenth-century East Africa', *African Historical Studies* 4 (1971), pp. 603–616; Z. Hirji, 'The socio-legal formation of the Nizari Ismailis of East Africa, 1800–1950', in *A Modern History of the Ismailis*, (ed.) F. Daftary (London, 2011), pp. 129–159.

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the relationship between the *shethia*s and religious authority within the Khoja *jamāt*—as well as within the Bohra and Memon *jamāt*s—is offered by Michael O'Sullivan.[28] Drawing on a wide range of sources, he argues that mercantile wealth and religious power 'did not always work in tandem' within these institutions.[29] Rather, they often functioned as arenas of negotiation—and at times of tension—over doctrine, ritual, and communal leadership. O'Sullivan demonstrates how local conflicts could reverberate across the broader network of *jamāt*s, shaping what he terms 'corporate Islam', a nexus of capital, discourse, and institutional control.[30] Yet, while his analysis is compelling, it falls short of fully engaging with the wider historical and transregional contexts that shaped these dynamics—particularly the external religious, political, and intellectual forces to which the Khojas and other Gujarati Muslim groups were increasingly exposed.

To sum up, the gaps in current scholarship are twofold. First, existing literature has largely ignored significant community histories, particularly those documented in non-European languages. Second, a critical void persists in the examination of the interconnected networks of *ʿulamāʾ*, *shethia*s, and *mullā*s who were instrumental in shaping the Isna Ashari Khoja identity. This study seeks to address these gaps by demonstrating how such networks not only facilitated the emergence of the Isna Ashari Khojas as a distinct religious and social group but also positioned them as a crucial force within the broader Twelver Shiʿi world.

Khojas post-1866: Aga Khan or Ayatullah?

The 1866 Aga Khan Case was a watershed event in the history of the Khojas. Amrita Shodhan argues that it transformed the Khojas' identity from a 'caste' to a 'sect'.[31] The verdict was instrumental in delineating the boundaries between Sunnism and Shiʿism, yet it also sparked a broader debate: which interpretation of Shiʿism was the 'correct' one? While the ruling of Justice Arnould designated the Khojas as 'Shia Imami Ismailis', intra-Shiʿi debates that emerged after 1866 indicate that sectarian affiliations remained fluid and subject to contestation. The implications were critical: Could a Khoja who revered the Aga Khan as a *pīr* but did not commit to his imamate still be part of the *jamāt*? Contemporary accounts from Bombay and Zanzibar indicate that even after 1866, the boundaries of Khoja identity—and whether their Shiʿi identity aligned with Ismailism or Isna Asharism—remained contested.[32] It was as if the Aga Khan Case primarily served to classify the Khojas in a manner that distinguished them from Sunni affiliation.

While the majority of Khojas embraced an Ismaili designation, others were not fully convinced. The reluctance of the secessionist Khojas, soon to become Isna Ashari Khojas, was understandable for several reasons.[33] First, they lacked a clear understanding of the theological distinctions and legal implications of aligning with Ismailism. Second,

[28] O'Sullivan, *No Birds of Passage*, pp. 111–141.

[29] *Ibid*, p. 140.

[30] *Ibid*, pp. 13–16.

[31] Shodhan, 'Legal formulation of the question of community', pp. 137–151; Shodhan, *Question of Community*, pp. 18, 35, 58–111; Boivin, *Devotion, Religious Authority, and Social Structures in Sindh*, pp. 48–51.

[32] Mulla Qadar, *Hidayat Prakash*, (ed.) A. Wadiya (Bombay, 1960), pp. 18, 23, 39 and passim; Amiji, 'Some notes on religious dissent in nineteenth-century East Africa', p. 612; Rizvi and King, 'Some East African Ithna-Asheri jamaats', p. 15.

[33] I use the term 'secessionist' not to suggest that the Twelver Khojas broke away from an original, homogeneous Khoja religious identity—an interpretation I explicitly seek to refute in this article—but rather to denote their separation from the institutional structure of the *jamātkhānā* and from the majority that came to align with the Aga Khan. There was, I argue, no singular or tightly organised religious orientation among the Khojas from which they could have seceded. In this sense, 'secessionist' signifies a socio-religious departure from an established communal institution rather than from an imagined religious unity.

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their devotional practices aligned more closely with those practised in Twelver Shiʿism. Practices such as *majlis* (commemorative gatherings) for Imam Husayn, the rituals of Shab-e Qadr (eves of 19th, 21st, and 23rd of Ramadan), and pilgrimages to Najaf, Karbala, and Kazamayn (Kadhimiya) are just a few examples.[34] Third, Ismailism—or what Green calls *neo-Ismailism*—had no established precedent in Bombay, making it an unfamiliar sect for the secessionist Khojas to associate with.[35] Bombay, however, provided a unique platform for navigating these uncertainties. As Green describes, Bombay was 'a marketplace in which various versions of faith, community, and leadership were on offer'.[36] In Bombay, Khojas were already exposed to Twelver faith which became the catalyst for secessionist Khojas to embrace it.

Read Satpanth Chhodo, and GharWaapsi books to know the real reason. How and why in spite of the Das Avatar recital, the Khojas were muslims

It would be a significant omission to begin the history of the Isna Ashari Khojas only after 1866. Prior to this period, Khoja religious practices reflected a complex synthesis of various traditions, incorporating elements from Hinduism, Twelver Shiʿism, and Sunni Islam. The recitation of the *Das Avatar* in the *jamātkhānās* demonstrated Hindu influences, while the *majlis* gatherings and participation in pilgrimages (particularly to Kazamayn where the seventh and ninth Twelver imams are buried) aligned with Twelver Shiʿa practices. Sunni influence was also present, as Sunni kazis (registrars in South Asian context, *qāḍīs* in Arabic) officiated Khoja marriages.[37] Notably, however, there was no identifiable set of practices that could be classified as distinctly Ismaili.[38]

The absence of Ismaili religious practices suggests that Ismailism was not regarded as a viable religious trajectory for the Khojas prior to the Aga Khan Case, rendering the latter a significant intervention rather than an organic development. This is particularly evident when examining Khoja communities beyond cosmopolitan Bombay, such as those in Kutch, Kathiawar, and Sindh. The *Mahuva Commission Report*, for instance, provides substantial evidence that Khojas in rural areas, such as Mahuva, engaged in practices that could be interpreted as more closely aligned with Twelver Shiʿism since the early 1850s.[39] However, to assert that Khojas in the mid nineteenth century were unequivocally Isna Asharis would be as erroneous as claiming they were Ismailis at that time.

Khojas in Karbala

Mulla Qadar, a Twelver Shiʿa native of Madras, arrived in Bombay around 1862, presumably to earn money so he could finance his travel to Karbala for higher religious education. During his sojourn in Bombay, he established a madrasa that attracted students from

[34] Mulla Qadar, *Hidayat Prakash*, pp. 2, 4, 18–19, 35. For a detailed discussion of Bohra and Khoja pilgrimage networks in Iraq's shrine cities, see M. O'Sullivan, '"Indian Money", intra-Shīʿī polemics, and the Bohra and Khoja pilgrimage infrastructure in Iraq's shrine cities, 1897–1932', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 32 (2022), pp. 213–250.

[35] N. Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840–1915* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 155–178.

[36] *Ibid*, p. 174.

[37] A. S. Picklay, *History of the Ismailis* (Bombay, 1940), p. 151.

[38] One could argue that there is no distinctly identifiable Ismaili practice in the first place. The observable devotional practices, whether Twelver or Hindu, among the Khojas are often interpreted as part of a transitional phase. This raises a critical question: In what capacity did the Khojas perceive their relationship with the Persian Ismaili imams—was it primarily as spiritual guides or as divinely designated imams? The answer to this question could provide a deeper understanding of their religious identity and its historical evolution. For the process of rearticulation of Khoja identity, see Asani, 'From Satpanthi to Ismaili Muslim', pp. 110–122; Boivin, *Devotion, Religious Authority, and Social Structures in Sindh*, pp. 24–74.

[39] N. F. Mirza, *Mahuva Comission Case no Report*, (ed.) E. D. Kaba (Amreli, 1920), pp. 37, 49, 59–61 and passim. This report serves as a valuable source for comparing colonial and local approaches to legal disputes, particularly in their use of different sources, frameworks, and sensibilities, which I am currently examining in a separate study.

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various communities, including the Khojas. This engagement laid the foundation for his long-term association with a few Khojas, some of whom would later become Isna Asharis.[40]

Seeking further religious knowledge, Mulla Qadar eventually left Bombay for Karbala around 1864. In Iraq, he encountered secessionist Khojas who had travelled to Karbala, particularly for the Arbaʿīn pilgrimage. During one such visit, he reconnected with a former student, Habib Abji Jetha Chand. He also met Nur Mohamed Meghji, a Khoja pilgrim from Zanzibar, who expressed concerns about what he perceived as doctrinal corruption among the Khojas. Subsequent encounters with other influential Khoja figures, such as Hasham Dosa in Kazamayn and Dewji Jamal, further deepened his engagement with the secessionist Khojas.[41]

Recognising the need for structured religious instruction, Mulla Qadar began teaching Khojas in Karbala, even extending educational opportunities to women by appointing a female preacher. Bakshi Shujaʿat Ali Baig, a fellow Indian and senior colleague of Mulla Qadar, advised the Khojas to appoint a *mullā* to accompany them and provide religious guidance. Following multiple appeals from Baig and consultations with Āyatullāh Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn al-Māzandarānī (1809–1892), the *marjaʿ* (supreme religious authority, lit. 'source of emulation') of his time, Mulla Qadar reluctantly agreed to accompany the Khojas. To formalise his role, al-Māzandarānī issued a decree and licence (*ḥukm-nāmeh*) authorising him to lead congregational prayers, solemnise marriages, oversee legal arbitration (*ṣulh*), collect religious dues (*khums*), and eventually return the funds to Karbala.[42]

Two considerations emerge in assessing this historical episode. First, the Khojas were already familiar with the Twelver Shiʿi tradition before engaging with Mulla Qadar, likely through existing Twelver Shiʿas in Bombay and other regions. Their pilgrimage and interactions in Karbala suggest that many Khojas had prior exposure to Twelver teachings rather than experiencing a sudden doctrinal shift due to Mulla Qadar's preaching activities. Second, it was Twelver *ʿulamāʾ*, not the Khojas themselves, who initiated and advised the appointment of a *mullā* as a religious guide. This reading challenges the dominant Isna Ashari community accounts, which tend to emphasise Khoja initiative in seeking religious guidance and requesting the formal appointment of a religious authority. Instead, it foregrounds the active role of Twelver scholarly networks in shaping the community's religious trajectory.[43]

The encounters of Khojas in Karbala during the nineteenth century illustrate the broader exchanges between secessionist Khojas and Twelver Shiʿism and underscore the strategic role of scholarly networks in facilitating religious integration. Rather than emerging as a self-driven initiative, the incorporation of Twelver Shiʿism into the community was shaped and institutionalised through the interventions of established Twelver *ʿulamāʾ*.

Mulla Qadar's return to Bombay

Mulla Qadar arrived in Bombay for the second time in 1873 and remained there until 1899. At this stage, he was 29 years old and no longer merely an ordinary Qur'an teacher. Having pursued advanced studies in Karbala, he had established connections with the Twelver

[40] Mulla Qadar, *Hidayat Prakash*, pp. 1–2.

[41] *Ibid*, pp. 2–6.

[42] *Ibid*, pp. 7–10. For the biography of al-Māzandarānī, see Āqā Buzurg al-Ṭihrānī, *Ṭabaqāt aʿlām al-Shīʿa* (Beirut, 1430 AH/2008), vol. xiv, pp. 805–806 (no. 1311); al-Sayyid Muḥsin al-Amīn, *Aʿyān al-Shīʿa* (Beirut, 1403 AH/1983), vol. vii, pp. 167–168 (no. 537); al-Lajna al-ʿIlmiyya (Committee of researchers), *Mawsūʿat ṭabaqāt al-fuqahāʾ*, (ed.) Jaʿfar al-Subḥānī (Qum, 1424 AH/2003), vol. xiv, pp. 264–266 (no. 4573). These sources highlight al-Māzandarānī's connections with Indian followers, presumably facilitated through his Indian students in Karbala.

[43] Rizvi and King, 'Some East African Ithna-Asheri jamaats', p. 15; Panjwani, *Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheris of East Africa*, p. 65.

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ʿulamāʾ network. His stay in Bombay was intended as a brief stopover, as he had originally been invited to guide the secessionist Khojas in Zanzibar. Moreover, Bombay would have been too challenging a place to establish a new *jamāt*, given the ongoing turmoil within the city's Khoja community. While in Bombay, Mulla Qadar took the opportunity to study the Khoja tradition in greater depth, documenting his observations in some detail.[44] His account was likely influenced by oral sources, often originating from secessionist voices critical of the mainstream Khoja beliefs and practices. During his early days in Bombay, Mulla Qadar actively propagated the Twelver faith. He initiated congregational prayers, drawing around 15–20 participants in the early phase. Over time, this number doubled, and his *majlis* gatherings began drawing more than 100 attendees.[45]

Perils of Mulla Qadar in Bombay

As his influence grew, Mulla Qadar faced increasing resistance from the Aga Khani Khojas. Pressure was exerted on Mohammad Rawji, in whose house Mulla Qadar was residing on the recommendation of Dewji Jamal. Both Dewji Jamal and Mohammad Rawji faced social and economic pressure from Aga Khanis. Although Dewji Jamal publicly distanced himself from Mulla Qadar, he privately arranged alternative accommodations for him. Despite this, the opposition intensified. The Aga Khani leadership issued a directive, warning that any individual who attended Mulla Qadar's gatherings would face excommunication.[46]

The growing hostility left Mulla Qadar increasingly isolated. Many Khojas who had initially shown interest in committing to Twelver Shiʿism gradually withdrew.[47] However, in response to this waning support, influential *shethia*s such as Khalfan Ratansi and Dewji Jamal intervened, offering assistance and mobilising those interested in the Twelver cause. As a result of their efforts, attendance at Mulla Qadar's religious gatherings surged, with as many as 400 individuals participating, leading to a noticeable decline in *jamātkhānā* congregations.[48] In reaction, the Aga Khani Khojas, Mulla Qadar narrates, dispatched three agents to assess the composition of these gatherings. Their findings revealed that among the attendees were 70 *shethia* members, which indicated that the movement had gained traction beyond the lower social strata. As a result of this heightened scrutiny and the fear of excommunication, along with its social and economic repercussions, Dewji Jamal, Khalfan Ratansi, Harji Jamal, and Jerajbhai eventually distanced themselves entirely from Mulla Qadar's association. All this happened in the very first year of Mulla Qadar's arrival in Bombay. According to his own account, his salary was stopped and no accommodation was arranged for him, as every effort was made to compel him to leave voluntarily. However, al-Māzandarānī, he writes, ordered him to remain in Bombay.[49]

There was a brief turning point when Ratansi's daughter passed away and the Aga Khanis refused to allow her burial in the Khoja cemetery complex on the grounds that he had been excommunicated. This episode led to the regrouping of Mulla Qadar's followers, strengthening their determination as he continued his mission through such bitter and distressing moments for another two years. But when the news of Lalan Alidina's attempted assassination in Karachi reached Bombay, fear spread among the Khojas, making it even more difficult for Mulla Qadar to secure accommodation among the Khoja quarters of

[44] Mulla Qadar, *Hidayat Prakash*, pp. 10–12.
[45] *Ibid*, pp. 12–13.
[46] *Ibid*, pp. 13–14.
[47] *Ibid*, pp. 14–15.
[48] This occurred during the month of Ramadan, when the congregation decreased in number for *iftār* (breaking the fast) gatherings. See *ibid*, p. 18.
[49] *Ibid*, pp. 19–22.

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Bombay.[50] Repeated requests were made for him to leave the city, with appeals even sent to al-Māzandarānī urging him to formally recall Mulla Qadar back to Karbala. Isolated and discouraged, Mulla Qadar was advised to refrain from participating in Khoja burial and marriage ceremonies, further deepening his marginalisation.[51]

Mulla Qadar's account is, at its core, a lamentation that reflects his personal struggles and hardships in Bombay. Of the 67 pages, more than 50 are dedicated to detailing his perils—persistent pressure from the Aga Khanis, the defection of his own followers, an assassination attempt, refusal of salary and accommodation, social isolation, and even Dewji Jamal urging him to leave.[52] His narrative provides a rare and valuable perspective on the complex socio-religious dynamics between the Isna Asharis and the Aga Khanis, particularly how these tensions intersected with familial and socio-economic ties.

Despite the significance of his experiences, Mulla Qadar himself was young and relatively inexperienced, and his tenure was ultimately short-lived. He was soon replaced by senior *ʿulamāʾ* who were better equipped to navigate the challenges he faced. However, his greatest enduring contribution was his role in training a new generation of Isna Ashari Khoja *mullās* and integrating them into the broader Shiʿi *ʿulamāʾ* network. This intellectual legacy, rather than any immediate success in Bombay, remains his most lasting achievement.

Khojas' exposure to Shaykhi ideology

During their gradual integration into Twelver Shiʿism, the secessionist Khojas encountered the Shaykhi thought in Bombay. Shaykhism, an esoteric and theosophical school within Twelver Shiʿism, emerged in the early nineteenth century in Iran and Iraq, inspired by the teachings of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī (d. 1826).[53] The movement developed during a period of significant transformation within the Shiʿi intellectual landscape, as Akhbārism declined and Uṣūlism became dominant. While Shaykhis resembled the Akhbāris in their emphasis on the reports of the imams, they diverged in their focus; rather than engaging in law (*fiqh*) and legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), they concentrated on theology, particularly on the supernatural status of the imams. Given their nascent engagement with Twelver Shiʿism and limited familiarity with its intellectual tradition, the secessionist Khojas were largely unaware of the doctrinal nuances that distinguished mainstream Twelver beliefs from Shaykhi ideology. However, in their exploration of new religious alliances and pursuit of broader religious connections, they encountered Shaykhism in Bombay.

Much of the available information about the presence of Shaykhism in Bombay is derived from the account of Mulla Qadar, who references an individual associated with the Shaykhi school, Sayyid Muḥammad.[54] Sayyid Muḥammad was the *pesh-imām* (individual who leads

[50] Lalan Alidina was excommunicated in 1876, soon became the target of a failed assassination attempt, and was ultimately assassinated in 1879. See Boivin, 'Ismaʿili–Isna ʿAshari divide among the Khojas', pp. 386, 391; Mulla Qadar, *Hidayat Prakash*, p. 26.

[51] Mulla Qadar, *Hidayat Prakash*, pp. 26–34, 49–50, 53–57.

[52] The edition comprises 117 pages in total, structured as follows: pp. 1–67 cover Mulla Qadar's preaching endeavours and struggles; pp. 67–84 recount Killu Khatau's initial mission to poison Mulla Qadar, his later conversion into a devoted follower, his conflict with the Aga Khanis, his subsequent stabbing of an Aga Khani Khoja named Hasan Mukhi, and his sentencing to death; pp. 85–100 narrate Mulla Qadar's role in establishing the Haidary Mosque in Bhimdi (Bhiwandi); and pp. 101–107 include an appendix containing Mulla Qadar and his followers' correspondence with *ʿulamāʾ* in Karbala.

[53] For a detailed study on the founders and doctrine of the Shaykhi school, see Y. Ioannesyan, *The Shaykhi Religious School: Historical Subjects, Teachings (Including Publication of Manuscript Samples)* (St Petersburg, 2023). Also see D. Hermann, 'Shaykhism', *Encyclopædia Iranica*, 4 December 2017, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/shaykhism (accessed 9 April 2025).

[54] Though Shaykhism was known in Awadh in the 1830s and 1840s, there is no evidence to suggest that Shaykhi thought in Bombay was connected to it. In Bombay, Shaykhism was introduced through Iranians, whereas in

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the congregational prayer) of the Moghal Masjid, which was built by an Iranian merchant associated with the Qajars named Ḥāj Muḥammad Ḥusayn Shīrāzī, hence also known as the Iranian Mosque.[55] The mosque served Iranian traders, Niʿmatullāhi Sufis and other Twelver Shiʿi residents of Bombay.[56] As the only significant Shiʿi religious centre in the city at the time, it naturally attracted Khojas seeking religious guidance and communal association.[57]

Sayyid Muḥammad, as described by Mulla Qadar, was an intriguing figure. Initially, Mulla Qadar assumed that Sayyid Muḥammad shared the same Twelver theology as himself, but he later discovered that Sayyid Muḥammad was a Shaykhi follower, particularly influenced by the teachings of Sarkār Karīm Khān (d. 1871).[58] Mulla Qadar recounts that in 1877, Sayyid Muḥammad sought to recruit him to his faith, recognising that his conversion could potentially influence the Khojas.[59] In one notable gathering, Sayyid Muḥammad introduced a treatise entitled *Ḥayāt al-nafs* [*fī ḥaḍrat al-quds*] by Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī, further revealing his theological leanings.[60] It should be noted that other contemporaneous accounts suggest that Sayyid Muḥammad was a recent convert to the Bahaʾi faith. Siyyid Mustafa Roumie (d. 1945), a Bahaʾi follower and a close associate of Mirza Jamal Effendi (d. 1898), recounts the latter's sojourn in Bombay and his efforts to propagate the tenets of Bahaism. Roumie states that Effendi succeeded in converting Sayyid Muḥammad (referred to as Meer Sayed Muhammad) to the Bahaʾi faith, describing him as 'one of the most confirmed and devout believers'.[61] This account indicates that Sayyid Muḥammad was a Bahaʾi rather than a Shaykhī. However, it is reasonable to assume that the boundaries between Shaykhī, Bābī, Kashfī, Ruknī, and Bahaʾi identities were somewhat fluid during that period. It could also be argued that these attributions of doctrinal affiliations were influenced by sectarian perspectives or simply a lack of awareness regarding the distinctions between these groups.[62]

Awadh, it was brought by Indian *ʿulamāʾ* who had engaged with Shaykhi discourses in Najaf and Karbala. For Shaykhi ideas in Awadh, see J. Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shiʿism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh, 1722–1859* (Berkeley, CA, 1988), pp. 185–189.

[55] Shaykh al-Raʾīs Qājār (d. 1917) visited Bombay in 1894 for eight months. He reports meeting Shaykh ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn Kāzarūnī, who served as the first imam of the mosque, and delivered lectures there during his stay. Murtaḍā Ḥusaynī Baraqānī, a close associate of Shaykh al-Raʾīs Qājār, further reports that he also delivered sermons during the month of Ramadan at the burial place of Aga Khan I in Hasanabad, Bombay. He notes that Muslims outside the fold of Shiʿism—arguably referring to the Khojas—also attended these lectures, both at the Iranian Mosque (Moghal Masjid) and in Hasanabad. See Abū al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad Taqī Shaykh al-Raʾīs Qājār, *Guzīdeh-yi az surūdehhā-yi Shaykh al-Raʾīs Qājār*, (ed.) Mīr Jalāl al-Dīn Kazzāzī (Tehran, 1369 SH/1990), p. 12 (introduction of the editor), pp. 34–35. I am grateful to Amir Mohammad Emami for kindly procuring a copy of this edition for my research. The lithograph edition was published by Nāṣirī press in Bombay in 1894. For the mention of this mosque in other sources, see S. Edwards, *The Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island* (Bombay, 1910), vol. iii, p. 311.

[56] Green, *Bombay Islam*, pp. 145–146.

[57] Mulla Qadar, *Hidayat Prakash*, pp. 35–48.

[58] Muḥammad Karīm Khān al-Kirmānī is the founder of the Kirmani branch of Shaykhism. He had close familial ties with the Qajar Dynasty. See D. Hermann, 'Muḥammad Karīm Khān Kirmānī', in *Christian Muslim Relations*, (ed.) D. Thomas (Leiden, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1163/2451-9537_cmrii_COM_32872 (accessed 9 April 2025).

[59] Mulla Qadar, *Hidayat Prakash*, 35.

[60] This book is divided into five sections, each detailing the Shiʿi roots of religion (*uṣūl al-dīn*) and concluding with a *khātima* (supplementary detailed essay) on the doctrine of return (*al-rajʿa*) in Shiʿi eschatology. See al-Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī, *Ḥayāt al-nafs fī ḥaḍrat al-quds*, (ed.) ʿAbd al-Jalīl ʿAlī al-Amīr (Beirut, 1421 AH/2000).

[61] S. M. Roumie, 'Bahaʾi pioneers: a short historical survey of the Bahaʾi Movement in India, Burma, Java Islands, Siam, and Malay Peninsula', *Bahaʾi Magazine* 22 (1931), p. 77. Moojan Momen adds that his activities, however, stirred up antagonism, leading to the decision that he should leave after only a few months in Bombay. See M. Momen, 'Jamal Effendi and the Bahaʾi faith in Asia', in *Search for Values: Ethics in Bahaʾi Thought*, (eds.) J. Danesh and S. Fazel (Los Angeles, 2004–2005), pp. 161–206. For the presence of Bābīs in Bombay, see Green, *Bombay Islam*, p. 122.

[62] Mulla Qadar, *Hidayat Prakash*, p. 37.

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Mulla Qadar's understanding of Shaykhism appears to have been shaped by his religious training in Karbala, a centre of Shaykhi debates, and the teachings of his senior teachers in India.[63] He references prominent mujtahids from Lucknow, particularly Sayyid Ḥusayn Ṣāḥib's *Ḥadīqat Sulṭāniyya*, to substantiate his critique of what he regarded as Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī's doctrinal deviations.[64] Mulla Qadar lists several works by al-Aḥsāʾī and al-Kirmānī, including *Sharḥ ziyārat* [*al-jāmiʿa al-kabīra*], *Dalīl al-mutaḥayyirīn* and *Sharḥ khuṭba* [*Tuṭanjiyya*], and *Irshād al-ʿawāmm*.[65] Among the contested doctrines in these works, he highlights the rejection of the bodily *isrāʾ* (ascension of the Prophet), the belief that God possesses both apparent and hidden entities, and hermeneutical approaches to religious texts that diverged significantly from mainstream Twelver Shiʿism. One example of these theological reinterpretations is the understanding of the Qurʾanic phrase *iyyāka naʿbudu* (You alone do we worship), which was construed as a reference to the Prophet and the imams rather than to God directly. Additionally, the concept of imamate, traditionally confined to the lineage of Banū Hāshim, was expanded within Shaykhi thought to include scholars deemed spiritually worthy. In another significant doctrinal departure, Shaykhis posited that the imams held a status analogous to the Prophet's wives, with Imam ʿAlī being likened to *Umm al-muʾminīn* (Mother of the Believers).[66]

Mulla Qadar sought to expose what he viewed as Sayyid Muḥammad's theological corruption, but his relatively lower scholarly standing limited his ability to mount significant opposition. Nevertheless, he remained deeply concerned about the potential spread of Shaykhism among the secessionist Khojas, whom he had personally instructed in Twelver Shiʿism. The Khojas' attraction to the Moghal Masjid and, by extension, to Sayyid Muḥammad, can be attributed to four reasons. First, it was the only established Twelver Shiʿi centre in Bombay which made it a natural focal point for their religious explorations. Second, Sayyid Muḥammad, as a sayyid and an elite Iranian figure, commanded significant respect, reinforcing his authority and influence over the Khojas. Third, he took a lenient approach to religious obligations such as marriage celebrations and financial practices like business on credit and interest. He offered pragmatic compromises that stood in contrast to the stricter interpretations of Mulla Qadar and made his approach more appealing. For instance, when Dewji Jamal returned to Bombay to arrange marriages for his son and daughter, he sought guidance from Sayyid Muḥammad rather than Mulla Qadar. In one notable case, Alarakhia Wali, whose son was marrying Dewji Jamal's daughter, wished to include music in the wedding festivities, but Mulla Qadar refused to grant permission on the grounds of its impermissibility in Islamic law. But Alarakhia Wali secured approval from Sayyid Muḥammad, which underscored the latter's more accommodating approach. Similarly, some prominent Khojas continued engaging in interest-based transactions (*wyāj*) with Sayyid Muḥammad's tacit approval, despite Mulla Qadar's firm opposition, again on the grounds of their unlawfulness in Islamic law.[67] Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, strategic considerations played a role—secessionist Khojas sought alliances with the

[63] For a detailed introduction on Shaykhism and Babism in Karbala, see D. MacEoin, *The Messiah of Shiraz: Studies in Early and Middle Babism* (Leiden, 2009), pp. 203–227.

[64] Mulla Qadar, *Hidayat Prakash*, p. 37.

[65] It should be noted that while *Sharḥ ziyārat al-jāmiʿa al-kabīra* is attributed to al-Aḥsāʾī and *Irshād al-ʿawāmm* to al-Kirmānī, *Dalīl al-mutaḥayyirīn* and *Sharḥ al-khuṭba al-Tuṭanjiyya* are authored by al-Aḥsāʾī's successor, Sayyid Kāẓim al-Rashtī (d. 1843). See al-Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī, *Sharḥ ziyārat al-jāmiʿa al-kabīra* (Beirut, 1420 AH/1999); Muḥammad Karīm Khān Kirmānī, *Irshād al-ʿawāmm* (Kerman, 1355 AH/1936); al-Sayyid Muḥammad Kāẓim al-Rashtī, *Dalīl al-mutaḥayyirīn*, (ed.) ʿAbd al-Rasūl al-Ḥāʾirī al-Iḥqāqī (Kuwait, 1423 AH/2002); al-Sayyid Muḥammad Kāẓim al-Rashtī, *Sharḥ al-khuṭba al-Tuṭanjiyya*, (ed.) ʿAbd al-Rasūl al-Iḥqāqī (Kuwait, 1421 AH/2001).

[66] Mulla Qadar, *Hidayat Prakash*, pp. 37–38.

[67] *Ibid*, pp. 39–41.

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Iranian Twelver traders and merchants in Bombay, a connection facilitated by their association with Moghal Masjid and Sayyid Muḥammad, which allowed them to strengthen their position within the broader Shiʿi network. For instance, influential Khoja leaders such as Harji Jamal, Jafar Kalyan, and Alarakhia Wali opposed Mulla Qadar's rigidity, arguing that maintaining ties with Sayyid Muḥammad was crucial for securing Iranian support.[68]

The portrayal of Sayyid Muḥammad in Mulla Qadar's account suggests that he was a figure who was both strategic and doctrinally ambiguous. Mulla Qadar actively sought to educate the Khojas on the internal diversity within Twelver Shiʿism, warning them against what he perceived as doctrinal misguidance. He likened their transition into Twelver Shiʿism to escaping the perils of the sea, only to risk falling into a well—a metaphor for their vulnerability to theological deviations.[69] There was a clear division between the strategically pragmatic and more lenient *shethia*s and the religiously conservative, socially marginalised followers of Mulla Qadar, including Ibrahim Jan Muhammad, Manjibhai Khatau, Rehmatulla Alibhai, and Hasham Dosa. This ideological and socio-economic tension represented a critical juncture in the evolution of the Isna Ashari Khojas. Mulla Qadar's faction, embodying the disenfranchised secessionist Khojas, remained resolute in their adherence to doctrinal and legal orthodoxy without any form of compromise. Ultimately, their perseverance led to their ascendancy and cemented the trajectory of Isna Ashari Shiʿism within the secessionist Khojas.

Rippling effects or a coalition of common goals: Karachi, Mahuva, and Zanzibar

The Khojas were not native to Bombay, and it is safe to assume that they retained strong ties to their ancestral homelands in Kutch and Kathiawar. Consequently, the socio-religious upheavals in Bombay had broader ramifications, influencing developments in these regions and precipitating similar disruptions. Reports of unrest and resistance in Karachi, Mahuva, and Zanzibar suggest that Khojas in Bombay were not alone in challenging the evolving religious orientation under the Aga Khan(s). Boivin argues that the instances of dissent arose independently rather than as mere imitations of or reactions to the opposition in Bombay.[70] However, over time, these movements became increasingly interconnected, united by a shared objective: contesting the Aga Khani narrative of Khoja religious identity.

Mulla Qadar's stop in Karachi to lead prayers and recite *majlis* among the secessionist Khojas en route to Bombay in 1873, along with the correspondence between the two communities in these port cities regarding communal tensions—particularly in response to the assassination attempt on Lalan Alidina—highlights their ongoing ties and shared concerns.[71] However, their challenges differed. In Karachi, Khojas predominantly emerged as secessionists in response to the reforms introduced in 1876 by Aqa Ali Shah (Aga Khan II), in his capacity as heir to Aga Khan I. According to the secessionists in Karachi, Aqa Ali Shah implemented policies that curtailed Muharram observances, discouraged Qurʾanic learning, and restricted the performance of Islamic practices, thereby fuelling discontent among sections of the Khojas.[72] Unlike in Bombay, where Aga Khan I was personally present, in Karachi, his son took a more assertive approach that aimed to standardise religious practices and establish a more uniform religious identity.

[68] *Ibid*, p. 48.
[69] *Ibid*, p. 44.
[70] Boivin, 'Ismaʿili–Isna ʿAshari divide among the Khojas', p. 382.
[71] Mulla Qadar, *Hidayat Prakash*, p. 26.
[72] Boivin, 'Ismaʿili–Isna ʿAshari divide among the Khojas', pp. 391–392.

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Similarly, Mahuva experienced rising tensions in the aftermath of the events in Bombay.[73] However, Mahuva had long been acquainted with Twelver teachings, as evidenced by the existence of a madrasa run by figures such as Majanmiya, who had been on a formal salary since at least 1909 VS/1852–1853. In 1920 VS/1863–1864, a Twelver *mullā* named Sayyid ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn from Madras is reported to have resided among the Khojas of Mahuva for a year and a half, providing religious guidance.[74] This presence of Twelver *mullā*s in Mahuva suggests that, while some tensions escalated in response to the broader communal shifts in Bombay, the Khojas of Mahuva were already familiar with the Twelver creed.

Zanzibar, with its well-established Khoja presence dating back to 1820, also experienced the reverberations of Bombay's religious contestations.[75] The economic ties between the two ports facilitated the movement of people and ideas, enabling the secessionist movement to gain traction in Zanzibar. Amiji suggests that the five Khoja families in Zanzibar who refused to pledge allegiance to Aga Khan I in 1861 may have had close business ties with the 'anti-Aga Khan party' in Bombay.[76] The Khoja Isna Ashari community records claim that several prominent secessionist Khojas, including Dewji Jamal and Alarakhia Wali, were excommunicated in Bombay in 1877.[77] Dewji Jamal, whose commercial networks in East Africa played a pivotal role in mobilising the secessionist movement, likely consolidated his position through connections with Twelver Shiʿas of Bahrain, Iran, and Iraq who had already established a presence in Zanzibar under Shaykh Saʿid's rule. This transition was further reinforced by the arrival of the Twelver Shiʿa cleric Sayyid ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn al-Marʿashī al-Shūshtarī (d. 1905), who is recorded to have reached Zanzibar before 1885 and played a crucial role in the religious transformation of the Khojas.[78] Note that Mulla Qadar was initially expected to travel to Zanzibar for preaching; however, this journey never materialised. Although Dewji Jamal had pledged to facilitate his travel, he ultimately did not fulfil this commitment.[79] This may have been due to Mulla Qadar's limited success or the tensions he had already generated in Bombay.

The dispatch of *mullā*s and *ʿulamāʾ* from Karbala and Najaf to Bombay and Zanzibar by al-Māzandarānī underscores his deep awareness of the internal tensions, sensitivities, and evolving needs of the nascent Isna Ashari Khojas. More broadly, this reflects the crucial role of transregional scholarly networks in facilitating the integration of secessionist Khojas into the Twelver fold. Their engagement underscores the broader process through which Khoja religious realignments were shaped by intellectual and clerical exchanges spanning India, Zanzibar, Bahrain, Iran, and Iraq.

Despite being geographically distant and occasionally disconnected in orchestrating their opposition, Khojas from Bombay, Karachi, Mahuva, and Zanzibar ultimately found themselves aligned in their challenge to the Aga Khan's authority. They were not united

[73] Mirza, *Mahuva Comission Case no Report*, p. 3; E. D. Kaba, *Shu Aga Khan Hajar Imam Che?* (Amreli, 1921), pp. 63–68.

[74] Mirza, *Mahuva Comission Case no Report*, p. 49.

[75] For studies on the Khojas of Zanzibar and East Africa, see Shirin Walji, 'A History of the Ismaili Community in Tanzania' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1974); Amiji, 'Some notes on religious dissent in nineteenth-century East Africa'; Rizvi and King, 'Some East African Ithna-Asheri jamaats'; Hirji, 'Socio-legal formation of the Nizari Ismailis of East Africa'; I. Akhtar, *The Khōjā of Tanzania: Discontinuities of a Postcolonial Religious Identity* (Leiden, 2016).

[76] Amiji, 'Some notes on religious dissent in nineteenth-century East Africa', p. 610. However, Amiji erroneously attributes this episode to Aga Khan II. For the pledge of allegiance document, see Picklay, *History of the Ismailis*, pp. 149–150.

[77] Federation of Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri Jamaats of Africa, *Trade Directory and History of the Community* (Arusha, 1960), p. 181.

[78] Amiji, 'Some notes on religious dissent in nineteenth-century East Africa', pp. 611–612; Rizvi and King, 'Some East African Ithna-Asheri jamaats', pp. 14–15.

[79] Mulla Qadar, *Hidayat Prakash*, pp. 19–20.

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in their Isna Ashari leanings as much as they were in their collective resistance against the Aga Khani narrative of Khoja religious identity. The persistence of this opposition across multiple regions in independent ways, bolstered by the opposition in metropolitan Bombay, reflects a broader socio-religious movement rather than a localised struggle. This, in turn, would eventually contribute to their convergence and the formation of Khoja Isna Ashari *jamāt*s and institutions.

Mōṭī (larger) *jamāt* vs *nānī* (smaller) *jamāt*

The formation of a distinct Isna Ashari Khoja identity did not occur at a precise or clearly defined moment. Instead, it gradually emerged as a coalition of diverse groups who shared a common interest: opposing the Aga Khan's authority, resisting the complete takeover of their communal institutions, and committing to the Isna Ashari creed, which they believed was the true faith. The creation of a separate *jamāt*, however, required establishing distinct community structures such as a constitution, dedicated worship space, independent leadership, and a distinct social framework—elements that were not fully actualised initially.

Despite ideological differences between Aga Khani and Isna Ashari Khojas, practical interactions remained harmonious for an extended period. Until the end of the nineteenth century, members of both the communities shared communal spaces such as *jamātkhānā*s and cemeteries.[80] Moreover, Isna Asharis continued to seek the legal privileges associated with family and inheritance laws granted to Khojas as a broader category to which they belonged.

An attempt was made to redefine the religio-legal identity of the Khojas in what Boivin views as a tactical move by Aga Khan I, potentially designed to deliberately exclude Sunnis and Isna Asharis.[81] Carissa Hickling, however, argues that this attempt was primarily aimed at British judges due to the 'confusing nature of Hindu law', with the potential for structuring Khoja succession laws along the lines of the Parsi Intestate Succession Act, which was passed in 1865.[82] Traditionally, Khojas followed Hindu inheritance law rather than Anglo-Mohammedan law.[83] As a result, the Khoja Commission was appointed in 1879 to codify community succession laws. Chaired by Justice Maxwell Melvill, the commission included the soon-to-be Aga Khan II and members of the Aga Khani and Sunni Khojas. After extensive deliberations, the commission introduced the Khoja Succession Bill to the Council of the Governor-General of India in 1884.[84] However, the bill faced objections from Sunnis and was never enacted.

According to Mulla Qadar's accounts, the Isna Ashari Khojas were not consulted in the Khoja Commission, which suggests that their social recognition, compared to Sunni Khojas,

[80] J. Bhimani, *Kera no Kajiyo: Agha Khan ni Maliki na Lekh sathe Sonanao Kalsho–Parts I and II* (Amreli, 2011 VS/1955 CE), p. 10 (introduction); Mirza, *Mahuva Comission Case no Report*, pp. 2–3; Amiji, 'Some notes on religious dissent in nineteenth-century East Africa', p. 612. The cemetery compounds in several places, inter alia, Amreli and Mahuva, continue to be shared even today by communities broadly identified as Khojas, irrespective of their specific religious affiliations.

[81] Boivin, 'Ismaʿili–Isna ʿAshari divide among the Khojas', pp. 388–390.

[82] Hickling, 'Disinheriting Daughters', pp. 169–170.

[83] For a detailed essay on origins, sources, and jurisdiction of Anglo-Mohammedan law, see S. A. Hussain, 'Anglo-Muhammadan Law', in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Law*, (eds.) A. M. Emon and R. Ahmed (Oxford, 2018), pp. 537–550.

[84] National Archives of India–Foreign Department, *Khoja Succession Bill* (Proceedings, October 1884), nos. 318–338.

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was still limited at that time.[85] The Isna Ashari *shethia*s must have been aware of these developments but refrained from intervention, likely because their interests were closely aligned with those of the Aga Khanis. This alignment, however, led to internal conflicts among the Isna Asharis, most notably between the *shethia*s and the disciples of Mulla Qadar. These disciples explicitly advocated informing the colonial authorities that they identified openly as Isna Ashari Khojas and were seeking official implementation of Islamic law. These internal tensions intensified, drawing in Sayyid Muḥammad, who, expectedly, supported the interests of the *shethia*s.[86]

Nonetheless, the Khoja Commission failed, highlighting that meaningful delineation could only emerge from internal pressures. These pressures came from two distinct sides: Mulla Qadar and his disciples sought a separation based explicitly on religious grounds, while Aga Khan aimed to disenfranchise the Isna Asharis for strategic reasons. It can be argued that the formation of separate Isna Ashari *jamāt*s was significantly driven by disenfranchisement resulting from firmans (decrees and directives issued by the Aga Khan) and administrative interventions by Aga Khans II and III. Aga Khan III's decisive action in 1901 through a firman formalised this separation. This directive explicitly banned Shiʿa *majlis* and namaz in Ismaili *jamātkhānā*s, effectively barring Isna Asharis from participating in communal Khoja events or accessing shared social and economic platforms and networks. This policy led to substantial defections, most notably in Zanzibar, where nearly one-third of Khojas transitioned to Isna Ashari institutions.[87]

Experiencing a growing sense of isolation from the Aga Khani Khojas, Isna Ashari Khojas organised themselves independently. They formed coalitions of *jamāt*s across interconnected regions, notably Kathiawar and Kutch, linking urban and rural communities in India with those in East Africa. They were mobilised primarily by *mullā*s and *shethia*s, whose influential roles were instrumental in propagating the movement and facilitating its spread across various towns and villages. Nevertheless, underlying tensions between Aga Khanis and Isna Asharis persisted, exemplified notably by incidents like the Jafar Fadu Badnakshi case in Karachi.[88] On the other hand, Aga Khanis began implementing stricter communal policies addressing specific social interactions with Isna Asharis, including questions about intermarriage, consulting *mullā*s, participating in each other's functions, and gift exchanges.[89] These developments underscored the institutionalisation of religious and social distinctions between the Isna Ashari and Aga Khani Khojas that reinforced communal boundaries persisting to this day.

While Sunni Khojas were often labelled as reformers, *Barbhai*, and dissenters, Isna Ashari Khojas were more commonly identified through Islamic markers. Terms such as Masīdīyā

[85] Mulla Qadar, *Hidayat Prakash*, pp. 57–59. This contrasts with Hickling's account, which suggests that Isna Asharis were indeed consulted and expressed that they should be 'covered under Muslim Personal law pertaining to Isna ʿAshari Shiʿas in India'. However, Hickling provides no reference for this claim. See Hickling, 'Disinheriting Daughters', p. 175. For a similar claim, also see Boivin, 'Ismaʿili–Isna ʿAshari divide among the Khojas', p. 389.

[86] Mulla Qadar, *Hidayat Prakash*, pp. 58–59.

[87] Amiji, 'Some notes on religious dissent in nineteenth-century East Africa', p. 612. Although bitterness arose in the early stages of separation, once the two groups formally parted ways, harmony was largely maintained, and Aga Khan III later expressed generous sentiments about the Isna Asharis. See A. Adatia and N. King, 'Some East African firmans of H. H. Aga Khan III', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 2 (1969), pp. 179–191.

[88] E. D. Kaba, *Jafar Fadu Badnakshi Case*–pt. i (Amreli, 1922); pt. ii (Amreli, 1922); pt. iii (Amreli, 1923); pt. iv–*Karachi Jafar Fadu Badnakshi Case Same Appeal no Chukado* (Amreli, undated); H. J. Lilley, *Jaffer Fuddoo Defamation Case Containing Counsels' Addresses to Courts Reported for the Defence by Mr. H. J. Lilley and the Connected History of the Assassins* (Karachi, 1925). I am grateful to Michel Boivin for kindly sharing his copy of Lilley's work with me. Also, see Boivin, 'Ismaʿili–Isna ʿAshari divide among the Khojas', pp. 386–387, 394.

[89] E. D. Kaba, *Ismailiya Council na Kaydao: Junagadh ni Khoja Ismailiya Council na Kayda no Review* (Amreli, 1914), pp. 3, 11, 17, 33 and passim. For the discussion on the first printed constitution of the Khojas of Karachi, see Boivin, *Devotion, Religious Authority, and Social Structures in Sindh*, pp. 54–60.

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or Masītīyā (mosque attendees) versus Aga Party,[90] Subhaniya (presumably linked to dhikr recitations) versus Bhagat (devotees of traditional Hindu deities),[91] and Isna Asharis versus Aga Khanis[92] emerged to signify theological and ritual distinctions. However, these labels did not always reflect actual beliefs or social realities. Within the community, the terms *mōṭī jamāt* (larger community) and *nānī jamāt* (smaller community) emerged organically, signifying demographic and structural distinctions, with Isna Asharis representing the smaller group. Ultimately, the formation of distinctly structured *jamāt*s solidified the Isna Ashari Khoja identity that aligned neatly with the traditional Khoja model of communal organisation.

Twelver Shi'i networks and Khojas

The case of the Isna Ashari Khojas serves as a compelling example of the effective institutionalisation of Twelver Shiʿism, a process that gained momentum following the Akhbārī–Uṣūlī dispute in Najaf and Karbala. This institutional framework, reinforced by Uṣūlī scholarly networks and the *marjaʿiyya* (supreme juristic authority), provided a structured and authoritative religious system that played a crucial role in shaping the Khoja transition.[93] When secessionist Khojas sought alternative religious affiliations during the politically and socially turbulent period in Bombay, they gravitated towards Twelver Shiʿi scholarly networks. Their integration into Twelver Shiʿism was facilitated by two key factors: first, their prior familiarity with Twelver rituals, which eased the transition; and second, the well-established institutional and scholarly framework of the Uṣūlī tradition, which was already fully operational and capable of absorbing new adherents. This combination of historical continuity and institutional accessibility underscores the significance of transregional Shiʿi scholarly networks in shaping religious transformations within diasporic communities.

This scholarly network operated—and still operates today—on three clearly delineated tiers. At the apex stands the *marjaʿ*, the most senior religious authority responsible for advancing scholarship and issuing legal edicts (fatwas). Below the *marjaʿ*, the second tier comprises senior *ʿulamāʾ* who mediate between the *marjaʿ* and the *mullā*s, disseminating advanced scholarly guidance and teachings. The third tier consists of junior *ʿulamāʾ* and *mullā*s who maintain direct, daily contact with the congregations. In the Khoja context, al-Māzandarānī belonged to the first tier, Baig to the second, and Mulla Qadar to the third. While laypeople maintained close connections primarily with third-tier figures, elites, merchants, and donors interacted closely with first-tier scholars, often mediated through the second tier. This structure also facilitated the financial sustainability of the scholarly network.

The secessionist Khojas' engagement with this scholarly network was shaped by institutional rather than personal connections. Because of this structured framework, religious authority and leadership transitioned seamlessly across generations. Figures such as al-Māzandarānī were succeeded by prominent *marjaʿ*s like Sayyid Muḥsin al-Ḥakīm (d. 1970),

[90] Mirza, *Mahuva Comission Case no Report*, pp. 2–5.

[91] A. Hardinge, *A Diplomatist in the East* (London, 1928), pp. 99–100; Amiji, 'Some notes on religious dissent in nineteenth-century East Africa', p. 612.

[92] Mirza, *Mahuva Comission Case no Report*, p. 7.

[93] For studies on the institution of *marjaʿiyya*, see A. Kazemi Moussavi, *Religious Authority in Shiʿite Islam: From the Office of Mufti to the Institution of Marja* (Kuala Lumpur, 1996); M. Litvak, *Shiʿite Scholars of Nineteenth Century Iraq* (Cambridge, 1998); L. Walbridge (ed.), *The Most Learned of the Shiʿa: The Institution of the Marjaʿ Taqlid* (New York, 2001); J. al-Qazwīnī, *al-Marjaʿiyya al-dīniyya al-ʿulyā ʿind al-Shīʿa al-Imāmiyya* (Beirut, 2005); E. Corboz, *Guardians of Shiʿism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Networks* (Edinburgh, 2005); L. Walbridge, *The Thread of Muʿāwiya: The Making of a Marjaʿ Taqlīd* (Bloomington, IN, 2014).

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Āyatullāh Khoie (d. 1992), and Āyatullāh Sistani (b. 1930); Baig was followed by *ʿulamāʾ* such as Sayyid ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn al-Marʿashī al-Shūshtarī in Zanzibar and Shaykh Abū al-Qāsim Najafī in Bombay; and Mulla Qadar by key Isna Ashari Khoja preachers—not from outside but from within the community itself—including Haji Naji, Aladin Gulam Husayn, and Abdullah Saleh Sachedina, among others, all of whom were his close disciples and had been groomed under his direct mentorship. This continuity underscored not only the resilience of the Isna Ashari Khoja institutional structures but, more broadly, the strength of the Twelver Shiʿi transregional scholarly networks that enabled the sustained transmission of religious authority beyond the influence of any single figure or actor.

Mulla Qadar himself exemplified the crucial role played by third-tier *mullās*. He introduced and safeguarded the Twelver Shiʿi faith among the Isna Ashari Khojas, trained numerous preachers, and consolidated the community's religious identity over three decades of sustained effort. Despite facing persistent challenges, he succeeded in founding an official madrasa for the Isna Ashari Khojas in 1892 and took pride in the creation of multiple *mahfil*s (congregation halls for *majlis* gatherings) across different quarters of Dongri and Bhiwandi in Bombay. His legacy can be summarised in three main contributions: his writings, notably *Chirāgh-e Hidāyat*, which circulated widely, reaching Zanzibar, China, Muscat, Bhavnagar, Mahuva, Kutch, Mauritius, and London;[94] his dedicated training of a generation of Isna Ashari Khoja *mullās*;[95] and his establishment of madrasas and other religious institutions.[96] The firm institutional foundations laid by Mulla Qadar and supported by the hierarchical Twelver scholarly network facilitated the enduring growth and cohesion of the Isna Ashari Khoja community.

Conclusion

This article has critically re-examined the transformation of Khoja religious identity in the nineteenth century and challenged the prevailing conversion theory. Rather than a simple shift from Ismailism to Twelver Shiʿism, the evidence suggests that all three major Khoja factions departed from a syncretic Hindu–Muslim or Muslim–Hindu identity commonly known as the *Satpanth* tradition. This transition was shaped by several factors: exposure to structured religious identities in urban settings, the colonial administration's classification of religion in Khoja disputes over inheritance, and the Aga Khan's increasing assertion of religious authority. The *Satpanth* tradition, among the Khojas, was the real loser in this process, initially fragmenting along Hindu–Muslim lines, then bifurcating into Sunni and Shiʿi affiliations, and eventually dividing into Aga Khani Ismaili and Twelver Shiʿism—ultimately fading as a distinct tradition.[97]

Significantly, this study has shown that the shift towards Twelver Shiʿism among the secessionist Khojas constituted a theological rupture, though not one arising from a deliberate or systematic quest for doctrinal reform. Rather, it emerged through a combination of circumstantial and historical contingencies. While the Khojas' immediate motive was to distance themselves from the Aga Khanis, the process was simultaneously shaped by the expanding influence of scholarly networks in Iraq and Iran that sought to propagate

[94] Mulla Qadar, *Hidayat Prakash*, pp. 20–21, 63.

[95] *Ibid*, p. 64.

[96] *Ibid*, p. 63.

[97] A number of self-identified *Satpanth* groups continue to exist today, but they differ considerably from the historical *Satpanth* tradition associated, inter alia, with the early Khojas. For instance, the *Satpanth* of Pirana represents a contemporary expression whose beliefs and practices reflect a localised evolution rather than a direct continuation of the historical *Satpanth* once followed by the Khojas. For further details, see Ivanow, 'Sect of Imam Shah in Gujrat', pp. 28–60; Z. Moir and D. S. Khan, 'New Light on the Satpanthi Imamshahis of Pirana', pp. 210–234; Shrī Nānakdāsjī Mahārāj, *Shri Satpanth Navnit* (Pirana, 2013).

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Twelver teachings. Moreover, this article has demonstrated that Mulla Qadar was not the sole architect of Khoja Twelver identity. His contributions must be seen within a broader scholarly network—comprising figures who preceded and succeeded him—who collectively shaped this identity while contending not only with the Aga Khani Khojas but also with apprehensive *shethia*s wary of the growing influence of clerical authority. In this struggle, he was supported by a group of socially marginalised zealot disciples whose uncompromising commitment to Twelver Shiʿism lent the movement both internal momentum and a degree of ideological orthodoxy.

This article has also identified significant gaps in existing scholarship. The first concerns the neglect of community histories preserved in non-European languages, which are essential for reconstructing a more nuanced historical narrative. The second is the lack of attention to the interconnected networks of *ʿulamāʾ*, *shethia*s, and *mullā*s who played a decisive role in shaping Isna Ashari Khoja religious identity. A more comprehensive engagement with these sources and actors is necessary to deepen our understanding of Khoja history.

Finally, the Iraqi–Iranian Shiʿi connection and the Uṣūlī dominance over Shaykhism played a crucial role in structuring Khoja Twelver identity. The organisational framework of the institution of *marjaʿiyya* was instrumental in this process, as evidenced by junior *mullā*s in Bombay seeking guidance from senior *ʿulamāʾ* in Lucknow, who in turn remained connected to *marjaʿ*s in the shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf. This hierarchical structure not only shaped the religious allegiance of the Isna Ashari Khojas but also ensured their long-term commitment to the institution of *marjaʿiyya*, making them some of its most ardent supporters in the East African and Western diaspora.

The choice between Aga Khan and Ayatullah for the Khojas was, at its core, a question of religious legitimacy. Subaltern communities have often been drawn to religious figures based in Iran and Iraq, attracted by their sacred lineage, the charisma of their language, the sanctity of shrine-linked geographies, and the broader prestige associated with these centres of learning and devotion. Both offices—the imamate of the Aga Khan and the *marjaʿiyya* of the Ayatullah—carried deep Iranian connections that reflected the enduring influence of Iranian religious actors in the Indian subcontinent. This influence extended beyond Shiʿism and was evident in the spread of Bābī and Bahaʾi thought as well.

Ultimately, this article highlighted that faith is not static but evolves in response to shifting historical, geographical, and political contexts. The Khoja case demonstrated that religious identity is not merely inherited but continually reshaped through institutional structures, transregional networks, and prevailing socio-political contexts.

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